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RUSSIA BETWEEN CHINA AND UKRAINE: THREE POINTS OF VIEW

ABSTRACT

Russia can be understood in many different ways. Observation from the inside is still possible. Doing your own research is very important, but it can't be done quickly. The fastest way to understand Russia leads through scientific texts. The level of scientific literature on Russia's foreign policy can be examined in two ways – through an extensive and long-term analysis of the entire world publications or through a very careful study of the most representative ones. The second path is easier and more effective. Three monographs published by the most recognizable scientific publishing houses in the world were analysed: written by experts, scientists using International Relations (IR) paradigms and scholars representing the neo-Marxist approach. Each of the three schools of foreign policy research has significant academic achievements, and also succeeds in the legitimization or de-legitimization of political actors. Each of these schools also has weaknesses. While experts did not always understand the cultural determinants, scientists with a very good theoretical feedback did not always know all historical facts. By contrast, the authors declaring a neo-Marxist approach actually aimed to justify Russia's policy rather than to understand it. A multi-level understanding of any (including Russian) foreign policy is possible thanks to the critical analysis of scientists work results.

Keywords: neo-realism, Marxism, Russian-Ukrainian war, Sino-Russian relations

1. INTRODUCTION

Until Putin's second presidential term, Russia pursued a more or less clear pro-Western foreign policy. Putin's Munich speech of 10th February, 2007, in which he questioned the unipolar vision of the world, was a clear testimony to the change in vectors. It was a significant declaration of co-building an alternative geopolitical system with the BRIC countries (Parkhitko,

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Martynenko, 2018). The war with Georgia in 2008, which ended with an armistice as a result of intervention by Western states, allowed (though with difficulty) to maintain illusions about Russia's functioning in framing the elementary rules in force in the world (Cornell, Starr, 2009; Mikhelidze, 2009). The annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014 followed Stalinist patterns of conquering large parts of Europe during World War II (Grant, 2015, Klymenko, 2020). The war in the Donbas, waged by Russian condottiere and soldiers, has aimed to at least a significant weakening of Ukraine, and above all, to its subordination (Robinson, 2016). The decision to war with Ukraine was an attempt to maintain a superpower position in the post-Soviet area (the near abroad). At the same time, due to the breach of many international treaties, including the UN Charter, it had to mean a radical break with the current international order. In the same 2014, Russia concluded a very unfavourable agreement on the construction of pipelines to China. As a matter of fact, Putin recognized the domination of China in fact. 2014 is a turning point for Russian foreign policy. How has this been reflected in world literature? At what theoretical, methodological and factual level has it been done? The main purpose of this article is to answer these questions.

How can geopolitical scientists, political geographers, and international relations scholars better understand Russia's place in a rapidly changing global and regional (dis)order? There are two ways of answering this key question. First, one can carefully analyse the entire extensive literature on Russia's foreign policy. Second, it is possible to make a targeted selection and to reduce the analysis to the most representative monographs published by most recognizable scientific publishing houses in the world.

In the first case, it is necessary to remember about the enormous diversity of the subject. The large part of it is typically historical in nature. In this case, it is worth mentioning, for example, a valuable text from recent years written by the outstanding historian Patricia Kennedy Grimsted (2020). Some of the publications deal with specific issues, e.g., network authoritarianism and Russian Internet geopolitics of information (e.g., Marechal, 2017). Many publications have been published by little-known publishing houses. Their collection and subsequent selection may require laborious efforts.

The second option – an analysis of selected publications in the world's most recognizable publishing houses – is a much better solution. The selection criteria in this case were very clear. Firstly, different schools of thought about international relations had to be represented. Thinking schools are not only IR paradigms, but also research approaches typical for many expert circles. Secondly, these publications should be syntheses rather than monographs or case studies. Thirdly, the authors of these books should be scientists known in the world of specialists.

Three books published in 2018 by two publishing houses of the ones of highest world ranks were selected – Oxford University Press and Routledge. The authors of these books are European scientists (Götz, 2018), experts from leading American think tanks (Bolt, Cross, 2018) and Russian scientists not belonging to the Kremlin camp or their associates scattered around the world (Kagarlitsky, Desai, Freeman, 2018).

The answer to question initialised at the chapter may be topical and informative for researchers of both contemporary geopolitics and Russia because these three books are written in three different theoretical paradigms. While Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross from the US presented the classic expert analysis, Elias Götz and co-authors (from Europe) applied IR-typical paradigms; Boris Kagarlitsky (from Russia), Radhika Desai, and Alan Freeman,

and their co-authors were in favour of the neo-Marxist perspective. All of them have an outstanding academic record. Paul J. Bolt is an author of well-documented articles and books on China's foreign policy and trade (Bolt, 1996, 2005, 2014). Sharyl N. Cross is an expert at Russian security policy (Cross, 2006; 2013). Elias Götz is the most prominent representative of neorealism interested in geopolitical implications of Russian-Ukrainian relations (Götz, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019). A soviet dissident Boris Kagarlitsky is Marxist theoretician and sociologist (Kagarlitsky, 2000; 2002; 2008, 2014, 2016; 2017).

In addition, the books under review belong to the few broadly themed monographs on Russia's relations with its main neighbours after the annexation of Crimea. Usually, these papers address to historical dependencies (Szporluk: 2020) or relations entirely political (Kaczmarek: 2015; Lukin: 2018) but do not show a wide panorama of Russia's connections with its neighbours.

Methodology of scientific papers may result from transferring the achievements of historiography to social sciences (see: Breisach, 2007). It can also draw on the technique of studying texts typical for content analysis. The key skill is to accurately ask questions about rationality of choosing theoretical assumptions, compiling the facts as well as the depth and accuracy of their interpretation. It is also necessary to notice the deficiencies giving up or diminishing the importance of processes, events, and facts.

2. RESEARCH FIELD – WHAT IS INTERESTING FOR SCIENTISTS?

The authors of *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global*, Sharyl N. Cross and Paul J. Bolt focus on relationships between China and Russia as part of 21st century global geopolitics. The history of these links and their strategic visions within the global order provide the background of the study. The basis of Sino-Russian cooperation is of an economic and military character, but not, for instance, of a cultural one. Therefore, these relations result from a community of interests rather than a sense of unity. Then, the issues of Ukraine, Syria, Central Asia, and the Chinese Sea are the areas of competition or a diplomatic game. The authors shed light on the security challenges for both the states: colour revolutions, cybernetic and IT security, terrorism, and violent extremism. Drawing on the analysis of these aspects of politics, the authors thoroughly and plausibly describe the implications of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership for world order and geopolitics.

Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis begins with an original presentation of three perspectives on relations between Russia, the West, and Ukraine. These perspectives draw upon three different visions of Russia, as a revisionist state, a victim, and a troublemaker. Tom Bukkvoll wonders why Putin decided to use force in Crimea and Donbas. Bettina Renz warns against the hasty use of the category "hybrid warfare" and proves that its use does not contribute to the understanding of Russian policy. Götz emphasizes the importance of neorealism in Russia's relations with Ukraine. Mette Skak points out the dominance of the *chekisty* [secret police officers] way of thinking in Russian strategic culture. S. Neil MacFarlane aims to settle the old Russian dilemma '*kto vinovat?*' (Who is guilty?) in Russia's relations with the West. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen takes up the same topic of Russia's relations with the West but applies an ontological security approach to analyse them. Tom Casier's article closes the book with the study of the dynamics of relations between the European Union and Russia.

Boris Kagarlitsky, Radhika Desai, and Alan Freeman edited *Russia, Ukraine and Contemporary Imperialism*. The volume commences with an editorial on the relationship between the conflict in Ukraine and so-called contemporary imperialism i.e., the West. Kagarlitsky introduces his original pro-Russian interpretation of events in Ukraine in 2014. Renfrey Clarke presents a detailed description of the war in Donbas, highlighting the role of far-right Ukrainian groups, and the proto-revolution conducted by workers in Donbas. Michael Hudson shows his interpretation of the crucial role of Ukraine in, as he calls it, the New Economic Cold War. Ruslan Dzarasov reflects on the possibilities of semi-peripheral Russia's interference in Ukrainian issues. Jeffrey Sommers and Vasily Koltashov discuss the relations of Russia, the United States, and Ukraine as a part of the Long Economic Crisis. Anna Ochkina delivers a report based on a survey conducted among the participants of a summer camp for left-wing and pro-Russian political activists from Ukraine. David Lane considers Russian-Ukrainian relations as a part of the long 'East-West Confrontation' process. Alexander Buzgalin, Andrey Kolganov, and Olga Barashkova claim that Russia is not an imperial economic power, and the West, and not anyone else, by its very nature, is aggressing Ukraine.

3. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: PURE FACTS, IR-PARADIGMS, AND THE NEO-MARXIST APPROACH

Bolt and Cross want to provide scholars and practitioners with 'a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the dynamic developments in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership' (p. vii). However, no explicit acceptance of one of the IR paradigms is articulated. This is mainly due to the dominance of the factual material description, including the presentation of the appointments of Chinese, Russian, and Anglo-Saxon experts, over the interpretative text. Bolt and Cross assume that collecting expert opinions is the most appropriate way of understanding Sino-Russian policy. It is noteworthy that the Delphi method is useful to recognize experts' ways of thinking, but it might not be sufficient to delve analytically into political phenomena. Each expert usually solves a different research problem and in a different way than the author of the study. Thus, merely gathering the opinions of even the best experts without their secondary and in-depth analysis does not allow researchers to formulate reliable conclusions.

The authors invited to publish in the book edited by Elias Götz precisely state on what theoretical paradigm they base. By using the theoretical framework of neorealism, Götz examines the evolution of Russia's Ukraine policy. He argues that if external pressure is weak, Moscow uses soft-power tools. In turn, the increase of external Western pressure on Ukraine results in the use of tools typical for hard policy. By giving numerous examples, Götz proves that such a relationship exists. However, I think that these relations cannot be treated universally. The Kremlin used very hard tools against, e.g., Czechoslovakia in 1968, although the West had no opportunities to either press or exercise influence. Hypothetical dependence in all such cases, and not only in the area of Russian imperial policy, can be formulated differently. If the groups of compradors and pro-imperial parties are strong, they are strengthened by some typical means of soft policy. Anti-imperial mass movements and social forces are weakened, shattered, or utterly destroyed by means typical for hard policy.

Neil MacFarlane traces relations between Russia and the West over the past quarter-century and argues, much more delicately than Mearsheimer (2014) does, that the US and West

Europe are partly responsible for the Ukrainian crisis. MacFarlane claims that it is necessary to conduct a more effective policy in that region (p. 107). The view of Andrey Wilson (2014) about the multifaceted attitude of the West towards the conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems to be closer to reality. The author points to not very strong economic ties, unwillingness to engage in an armed conflict, and forced reaction to Russia breaking international treaties.

In the book edited by Kagarlitsky, Desai, and Freeman, the authors aim to set out their way of thinking based on 'an updated historical materialist account of imperialism' (p. 4) understood as the views of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Hilferding, Bukharin, and Luxembourg. The only contemporary theory cited in the introductory text written by the editors is Uneven and Combined Development. Although it was initiated by Trotsky, it is still being developed (James, Nairn: 2005). The theoretical approach may be useful for determining and comparing the material resources of the states dominated by different socio-economic formations.

To sum up, the methodological and theoretical level of Bolt and Cross is adequate to world science. In this case, the expert approach allowed the authors to show the levels of complexity of cooperation and competition between China and Russia. While the theoretical level of the volume edited by Götz is high, it is methodologically undefined, mainly due to the small number of classically empirical texts. However, original theoretical proposals pave new and promising avenues for future studies. The neo-Marxist approach by Kagarlitsky, Desai, and Freeman has great explanation possibilities for determining the strength of relations between the states.

4. MINOR AND CONSIDERABLE MISTAKES

On p. 2, Bolt and Cross quote the opinion of Russian sinologists who call Russia 'the elder sister' and 'a woman with a senior status.' On p. 297, they state, 'It is unclear what can prevent Russia from becoming a junior partner of China, in spite of protests that this will never happen.' The authors fail to use the concept of 'the older brother,' which is commonly known in the Soviet empire and comes from the old tribal customs of the duty to care for younger siblings in exchange for their subordination (d'Encausse: 1987). Since 2014, Putin has been, as one can assume with increasingly greater certainty, 'the little brother' for Xi Jinping. The dynamics of this process of Russia becoming the state subordinate to China is still one of the most important research goals within the research field set by Bolt and Cross.

The most serious shortcoming of the book edited by Götz is its heuristic level. The authors very often quote academic studies or expert reports. Undoubtedly, the secondary use of data is a convenient activity because it does not require the verification of facts collected by other researchers. However, in that case, one only uses the data that has already been gathered to address other, and usually different, research purposes. One cannot be sure whether the data that could be important to their study (but is unimportant for the quoted researcher) is omitted or not. Independent collection of data is also important for a researcher because of the opportunity to get acquainted with the context. This is the key to understand Chinese cultural epiphenomena, and it is also crucial when exploring the post-Soviet area.

Kagarlitsky, Desai, and Freeman express undisguised dislike towards one of the parties of the conflict that began in February 2014. The editors of the volume use the following expressions to describe the new ruling elite of Ukraine after the Maidan: 'the Kyiv regime' (p. 1); 'The West sponsored regime (...) which also contained members of extreme fascist

group including the Right Sector and Svoboda' (p. 1). Kagarlitsky's judgment is even more severe: 'It may have been premature to describe the Kyiv government as fascist in February or March 2014, but as time went on, such a characterization appeared less and less far-fetched' (p. 38). In 2014, the word 'fascist' was widely used in Russian propaganda to define the new Ukrainian government (e.g., Snyder: 2014). The greatest blame of the West is hostile actions against Russia, which, as asserted by Dzarasov, rely on 'NATO expansion to the East, a number of 'colour revolutions' installing in power anti-Russian and pro-Western puppet regimes' (p. 95). The West is thus accused of acting the demiurge of evil, and Ukraine after 2014 is only its passive performer.

Consequently, the pejoration of Ukraine and the West is combined with the amelioration of Russia's activities. As Hudson assumes, in 2013, Russia lent \$3 billion to the Yanukovich government 'as a gesture of solidarity' (p. 68). One should not consider the assumption made by the scholar as a serious one, because the acts of altruism between two states hardly occur. Consequently, Hudson, in no way, connects the fact of this loan with the refusal of the President of Ukraine to sign an association act with the EU.

Russia, Ukraine and Contemporary Imperialism mentions 'the revolt of the people of Crimea' as well as 'Donbas approaching Russia about help' on numerous occasions. Meanwhile, the annexation of Crimea was, first and foremost, a military operation. By no means, it was not the rise of the local population (e.g., Bukkvoll, 2016; Davies, 2016). Yet, in his article on the Donetsk and Lugansk region, Renfrey Clarke claims that 'the Donbas revolt was a local initiative' (p. 46). The same author maintains that the West accused Russia of shooting down a Malaysian aircraft (July 17, 2014) 'despite a now-notorious lack of evidence' (p. 62). In several paragraphs, the authors argue that Putin's policy was restrained since the politician sought an agreement with the West on Ukraine and only justified his measures as humanitarian aid for the Donbas. Lane writes 'Despite Western insistence on Russian military involvement, there is no firm evidence of the involvement of the Russian army (though there certainly are volunteers) in east Ukraine' (p. 153), and then in a footnote 11, on the same page, mentions 'regular Russian troops, numbering 6500 men' (p. 153). As the author points out, 'the causes of the civil war in Ukraine are to be found in Kiev, not in Moscow' (p. 150). Clarke's article ends with the following summary: 'for the world left, solidarity with struggles such as those of the Donbas rebels is an elementary duty' (p. 66).

Errors in the book by American experts result from insufficient knowledge of not only the theory, but also the cultural determinants of relations with the outside world, which are characteristic not only for Russians, but also for Chinese. Shortcomings in the book edited by Götz result from insufficient knowledge of facts, including historical ones. We find the most serious mistakes in the last book discussed, edited by Boris Kagarlitsky, Radhika Desai and Alan Freeman. The authors' political views, including the unequivocal acceptance of the pro-Russian viewpoint, make them diminish, marginalize or ignore the arguments favourable to Ukraine and unfavourable to the Kremlin. They do the opposite when they report on Russia's activities. The collective work edited by Boris Kagarlitsky, among others, can therefore be situated on the border between science and propaganda.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The vital achievement of Bolt and Cross is undoubtedly the creation of a panoramic and precise image of Sino-Russian relations in the first two decades of the 21st century. Götz's volume may be a model for a research approach. The multitude of theoretical approaches (neo-realism, constructivism, and so on) allowed them to shed light on complex relations between Russia, the West, and Ukraine. Kagarlitsky, Desai, and Freeman co-edited book can help to understand Russian and leftist – pro-Russian points of view.

Bolt and Cross deliver a highly reliable report based on desk research and the Delphi method. It is a decent analytical work based on well-collected factual material and expert accounts. However, the volume lacks a theoretical basis and a well-formulated research problem.

The book edited by Götz is at a high theoretical level due to the creative use of existing IR-paradigms, but also the creation of new theoretical frameworks. In several texts, the innovative political science theories (e.g., a new approach to hybrid war) appeared. However, the thematic dispersion of the texts is so large that the articles form an unfinished mosaic rather than a comprehensive research project.

Kagarlitsky, Desai, and Freeman gather contributors who share an appreciation for the broadly understood post-Marxist thinking patterns. If the texts are still at the level of Wallerstein and Stiglitz, they are just a radically anti-globalist reading. There are some ideas having great explanatory potential, e.g., to account for economic imperialism or research into the awareness of political leaders.

In sum, the authors of the books under review have taken more or less significant steps to develop our knowledge of Russia itself and its relationships with its major neighbours. Furthermore, the critical review made it possible to determine how we might and how we should write about Russia.

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